

Focus On:: Worker Participation

Worker Participation **Speakers Say There Are Ways** **To Replace 'Fault-Finding' Systems**

There are ways to determine the real reasons for workplace accidents and avoid blaming workers, according to speakers at a national conference June 13, who discussed the advantages of root cause analysis report forms, tracking near misses, and observing critical behaviors on the job.

Safety professionals from local California government agencies addressed a session of the American Society of Safety Engineers entitled "Recognizing and Replacing a Fault-Finding Injury Reporting System."

Don Michels, senior risk management specialist for Chula Vista, Calif., suggested that businesses look at how to encourage workers to solve problems rather than blaming them for accidents. When he first started working for the city, safety meetings investigating accidents lasted about 10 minutes; when machinery was sound, operator error was assumed, Michels said.

Improving Reporting Forms

Part of Michels' solution was to create a better tool for investigating by improving reporting forms. Now each of the reporting forms--the employee injury reporting form, the supervisor report form, and the witness report form--all have the same headings.

In addition, "we try to expand each one of the sections a little bit, get our people to think a little bit further than just operator error," he said. In fact, "operator error" is not even on the forms, he added. The theory is that if there is no operator error, the cause of an accident has got to be something else, and there may be numerous causes, Michels said.

Michels also said the forms now allow the city to collect data and recognize trends, and can be used as predictors in the future. He said there are also forms that record "near miss" incidents, allowing safety officials to look at trends and providing opportunities for correcting problems.

Cait Casey, principal safety and health coordinator of Sweetwater Authority in San Diego, said a safety culture survey, which looked at the positive and negative aspects of that workplace, found that the system consistently failed the individual. According to Casey, Sweetwater was interested in a system that worked with employees.

An Award for Safety

Among activities to highlight safety, Sweetwater instituted an awards program to recognize safety-related actions by employees, according to Casey. The award is called "the Rubey," named for employee Ruben Aguilar, who on his lunch hour devised a lockout tool to protect workers, Casey said. The award has no monetary value, but is highly prized. Casey noted recently there were 100 nominations out of about 137 employees. Each nominee received a Rubey certificate.

Casey also noted that Sweetwater has developed forms to examine "close calls" and the reasons that an accident almost happened. Their purpose is to figure out how to change the system and stop going to the worker to say "you are at fault, you are to blame," she said.

Now, on Fridays at 3 p.m., Sweetwater workers go to the lunchroom and have energetic discussions over close-call incidents and whether actions, such as "rushing" or "being in a hurry" were involved. She noted that the forms are similar to ones in Chula Vista, but they allow for different terminology that is unique to the Sweetwater culture.

Casey also credited the workers with improving the workplace. "They've come up with ways for people to go home safer and happier at the end of the day and they are willing to tell everybody about it," she said.

Observation Cards

Emma Lewark, risk management specialist for Chula Vista, told the attendees that the city has developed a small card, like a post card, that is used when observing workers in the field. She said the card is used to identify safe and unsafe behaviors and can identify how the system fails the worker. Lewark noted that observers may note as many as six positive actions of a worker and point out a couple of areas where the worker might be able to work more safely.

She said the small observation cards are well received by workers. They can highlight strengths and weaknesses, and provide a snapshot to the observer. Short and to the point, they are a good way to refresh safety training in the field, Lewark said. 